



Libraries in Non-Consolidated Systems

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THE MEMBER LIBRARIES of non-consolidated systems are properly considered as branches in the context of this issue of *Library Trends*, possessing, as they do, many of the characteristics of branches in a unified city system. Such libraries are here defined as libraries serving approximately the same population as branches in a city system—25,000 to 50,000 and up—and are members of a system serving some 250,000 persons or more. While this arbitrary limitation is deemed necessary to permit meaningful comments about the autonomous and semi-autonomous libraries in non-consolidated systems in relation to the branch libraries of city systems, much of what is stated here applies to libraries in non-consolidated systems serving smaller populations.

Within the strict definitions set for this paper, not many libraries or systems are involved. In New York State the four non-consolidated systems include thirty-three such libraries as members. Wayne County, Michigan, has fourteen libraries serving more than 25,000 population. The total number of libraries, without regard to population served, within these five systems is impressive, one hundred seventy-five, including the thirty-two branch libraries of Buffalo and Rochester. In New York State alone, several hundred public libraries within non-consolidated systems may be counted if the population limitations of library and system size previously noted are disregarded.¹ The chances for widespread future extension of the non-consolidated system are excellent. It is only in recent years that non-consolidated systems have come onto the library scene, and it is appropriate to note the reasons for their sudden appearance and growth: (1) The rapid increase in incorporated municipalities brought about by the movement of population to the fringe cities and particularly to the open land adjacent to the central city. The fact that much

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of the population had previous experience with good public library service in the central city generated the demand for the same service in their new environment. (2) The development and acceptance by the profession of the systems concept as exemplified by its endorsement in *Public Library Service*, 1956.² The systems or cooperative approach to library service was, of course, strengthened by similar movements in the fields of public health, education, water supply and sanitation. (3) The successful demonstration of the systems approach as a means of solving many of the problems of the smaller library. (4) Perhaps most importantly, the success of the cooperative systems movement in New York State where adequately financed, far-reaching plans and strong professional and lay leadership produced new, exciting, and successful developments.³

The consolidated system may be defined as a system where a single library board or other agency or official has responsibility for the total library program, including books, buildings, personnel and finance. In the non-consolidated system, the local library board is responsible for and controls the operations of its library, including selection of personnel, books, building maintenance, hours, program, and its budget. If the non-consolidated system is a federated system, the library is established and its board is appointed by the sponsoring governmental unit such as a county board of supervisors. If it is a non-consolidated, cooperative system, the system is formed and its board of trustees elected by a vote of the trustees of the member libraries. Finally, it is important to note that membership in the non-consolidated system is voluntary and that fundamental autonomy is retained by the member library.

There are numerous examples of cooperative arrangements of an informal nature and of contracts of a limited nature, but these relationships are not considered to constitute a system in the meaning here intended. A system, as understood here, should provide a wide range of services from a central source to affect significantly the quality of service rendered at the agency level. Actually a contractual agreement between a member library and the central agency may be broad enough to make the contracting library a system member within the foregoing definition.

Now that the organizational structure of the non-consolidated type of system has been developed successfully and is proving to be the long-sought device for bringing the generally strong, often excellent medium-sized libraries into larger units of library service, (in 1963

thirty-two of thirty-eight medium-sized public libraries in New York State were in a non-consolidated system⁴), an examination of a few of the advantages of the non-consolidated system is in order.

(1) It is a practical library governmental structure. While the political scientist may prefer unification by consolidation, the people and their elected representatives have shown little enthusiasm for the method. The basic fact is that the formation of a non-consolidated system is practical.

(2) Even if the consolidation of all public library agencies in the large metropolitan areas were possible, the resulting monolithic library organization would not likely be conducive to the provision of the best library service, because there is the danger of a large organization, particularly a public agency free of competition, becoming a cumbersome, inefficient bureaucracy. In the larger metropolitan areas with populations running into millions and with scores of local governmental units, several library systems are justifiable. In non-consolidated systems, identities are preserved and friendly rivalries as well as cooperative programs among the system's members will provide an environment favorable to stimulation, achievement, and recognition, both institutional and personal. Ralph Shaw found in his Toronto survey that merging libraries would not improve service to nearby neighbors. He concluded that "holdings of the libraries, the variety of staff available, the services rendered, are all higher in the main libraries of most of the municipalities than they are in the branches of the Toronto Public Library."⁵ Shaw found also in his study of the Brooklyn, Queens and New York public libraries that "it becomes less economical to increase the size of the units than it does to decentralize administrative responsibility, just as it does in factories."⁵ Harold Hamill also believes that the independent libraries around Los Angeles provide "basic services and duplication of general materials, much better than the larger systems can do."⁶

A recent study of branch service in a city of 500,000 revealed that (1) only the central library provided adequate library service to all age groups although the library had twenty-six branches and three bookmobiles, (2) the median independent library was open twenty-three percent more hours than the median city branch; provided thirty-three percent more reader seats; had over three times as many books; five times the number of periodicals; and circulated twice as many books per capita, and (3) the cost per circulation of operating the median independent library (forty cents) was thirty-three percent

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less than that of the median branch (sixty cents).⁷ There are several reasons for this condition. (a) There is a tendency to centralize at the main library reference materials and equipment to a greater extent than is desirable. (b) The fringe city libraries often are much better supported than the central city library and thus have funds to develop adequate collections and employ competent personnel necessary for quality library service.⁸ (c) The outer area cities, being too small to support the research library concept, have been able to concentrate their funds on providing the services and materials most directly needed by their users. (d) Large cities with shrinking or stabilized tax resources find the expense of the research library a sizeable drain on the tax funds available, leaving proportionately less than desired for branch development. (e) The traditional pattern of branch service is inadequate for today's needs.⁹

(3) Another advantage of the non-consolidated system is the large number of library trustees involved in its operation. This involvement increases the number of community leaders who have concern for the system and its fortune. Broad representation of community interests among many boards brings added strength to a system. In Wayne County, for example, the Detroit Public Library, serving 1,600,000 people, has seven library trustees. The remaining libraries in the county serving 1,000,000 people have a total of eighty-three trustees among those libraries having library boards, and many more public officials are involved where no boards exist. Broad community representation discourages system stagnation and promotes flexibility and innovation. Ralph Shaw has noted that "local participation and responsibility for the development of library services is one of the keystones in developing effective library service. The loss of local interest and initiative and participation would result inevitably in lower quality of library service."¹⁰

(4) A further advantage of the non-consolidated system is that it fosters organizational tensions which are healthful and which can improve staff and institutional performance. One such tension is the ever present possibility of withdrawals from the system. Even if it rarely happens, this has become an institutional concern of the non-consolidated system, ineluctably pervading decisions and encouraging a judicious and thorough approach to institutional services and problems. The independence of the community librarian is recognized by the systems director. Deference to authority as such is at a minimum in federations and cooperatives. Under such conditions, problems are

sooner and more freely discussed. Another desirable tension is that the local library board has its own librarian in whom it has confidence. Therefore, his reactions to the system and its services are likely to be respected by his trustees and communicated to the system's board. Thus, non-consolidated systems have numerous checks and balances. Power is dispersed, and democratic patterns of behavior are encouraged. The systems' antennae are raised high for receiving signals and acting on them with promptness.

The advantages of decentralization, dispersal of authority, shared responsibilities, and the involvement of large numbers of officials, boards, and citizen groups which are found in the non-consolidated system have been noted. It is necessary to point out that these strengths also have potential seeds of weakness. On balance, the advantages of the non-consolidated system outweigh the disadvantages. These weaknesses are:

(1) A unified administrative authority is lacking. Some recommendations of the system may be ignored, having only the authority of persuasion. Of course, in a cooperative system, the members can and do impose policies and procedures on themselves, but the very flexibility of the cooperative system may, if over-indulged, imperil its effectiveness and existence. Self-discipline, while the best discipline, cannot always be relied on. The highly centralized authority of the consolidated system is looked upon with envy by the director of a cooperative in his moments of impatience and occasional harassment. However, the administration of member libraries of a non-consolidated system may be delegated to the central agency, as is often the case in the Wayne County (Michigan) Public Library. This pattern appears to be the exception rather than the rule but may be increasingly acceptable in the future.

(2) Power is dispersed among many librarians, trustees, and other city officials. The larger the measure of freedom the greater the incidence of controversy, often over quite minor matters. This is not to say that the consolidated system has eliminated this type of staff problem but possibly keeps it under better control with fewer persons who feel entitled to be fractious.

(3) The non-consolidated system does not have the simplicity of organization of the consolidated system. Policies and procedures may be developed, adopted, and implemented more speedily in a consolidated system than in a non-consolidated system. In addition to the

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usual internal organizational hierarchy, the libraries in a non-consolidated system have library boards, occasionally friends of library groups, legislative bodies, or city managers, any of whom may ruffle the administrative waters. The number of check points before action is taken is larger in the non-consolidated system. However, simplicity of the structure in a consolidated system does not necessarily mean that it is used, only that the potentiality is present.

Not related to the possible structural deficiencies but a serious disadvantage would be the lack of a large reference collection. The non-consolidated system aiming at full library service requires access to the specialized personnel and extensive collections of a reference center. In some non-consolidated systems (e.g., Nassau County, New York), where there is no central library, several libraries have been assigned certain subject areas which are developed in depth with the assistance of generous state grants. In Wayne County the book collections of many of the system's libraries are approaching 40,000 to 50,000 volumes. Even with the depth exhibited by some of the member libraries' collections, access to a large central library rich in resources is a requirement for a total library service program. A network of reference centers must be created by more formal contracts than now exist for the non-consolidated system to attain bibliographical adequacy or to insure the continuance of services now rendered without cost by the central library.

Another weakness will exist if reciprocal borrowing privileges do not prevail in the non-consolidated system. Both in the New York State and in the Michigan laws, free and equal access is provided to all borrowers at all libraries in the system.

The financing of non-consolidated systems varies. Most often local funds are the chief source of revenue but with increasingly large grants coming from the state. In 1964 the Library Services and Construction Act provided federal funds for non-rural libraries, raising hopes that a much-needed new, reliable and growing source of funds has been found. In the federated system, funds are appropriated for the system as a whole which then provides for all operating expenses of the member libraries except capital expenditures for buildings. In the cooperative system, the service center may be supported entirely by state funds, as in New York, or, as proposed in Michigan, by a combination of state and local contributions.¹¹ The heart of systems formation, particularly of systems involving the numerous and inde-

pendent medium-sized libraries found in metropolitan areas, lies in the method of financing the service center. The financial incentive in many cases is the catalytic agent in precipitating the decision to join a system. When local funds are not drained off for the central service costs and when a wide range of new services is provided at little or no cost to member libraries, the combination proves irresistible. The revenues of the non-consolidated system are, thus, a combination of federal, state, and local funds. For example, in 1965, the Nassau Library System served 51 libraries and received \$564,549 in state aid. Thus, each library of the system was subsidized on an average by \$11,069 in state funds,¹² expended for services provided by the service center.

In Wayne County, Michigan, if fully implemented by future appropriations, the new law would bring a state grant of 30 cents per capita to the system's headquarters, while requiring each member to contribute at least 10 cents per capita. Funds received in 1965 were 68.79 percent local, 21.94 percent county, 5.36 percent state, and 3.91 percent federal. Estimates for 1966 show the following distribution: local 79.08 percent, county 8.63 percent, state 8.92 percent, and federal 3.37 percent. The pioneer Library System (Rochester, New York) in 1962 revealed this distribution: local taxes 67.1 percent, state aid 21.5 percent, other income (including endowments, fines and fees) 11.4 percent.¹³ Trends in public finance indicate that increased aid from state and federal sources may reasonably be anticipated. The national plan for public library service sponsored by the American Library Association suggested that the proportion of financing be 60% local, 25% state, and 15% federal.¹⁴ In the still more distant future, federal and state grants may likely be increased and local funds reduced until approximately one-third comes from each level of government.

The range of services of the library in a non-consolidated system is similar to that provided by a branch in a consolidated system and hardly requires elaboration. These services include the basic printed and audio-visual material collections; rotating collections; inter-library loan; staffs with specialization in adult, youth and children's services; reference; special programs for children and adult groups; printing and public relations; and services to schools, including school visits and loan of books. In the larger and better libraries one often finds a surprising depth in the book and reference collections. In the Westchester and Nassau County Library Systems there are member libraries with collections of 100,000 to 200,000 volumes and large holdings of

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periodicals, both in bound and microfilm form. The buildings of these libraries also tend to be larger than those of branches of consolidated systems.

Access to the extensive resources of a central library is necessary if a full complement of services is to be provided by a system of non-consolidated libraries. The New York plan has recognized this by subsidizing the building of a central collection of a minimum of 100,000 adult non-fiction titles to be acquired over a ten-year period. The desirable size of the intermediate type collection of a central library in a non-consolidated system, somewhat removed from the largest resource center, has not been determined in practice, but an adult book collection of some 250,000 volumes would serve most patrons except those with specialized or esoteric needs. Since knowledge and the instruments of knowledge are expanding at accelerating rates, the difficulty of estimating a collection size for the future is obvious. The new technology may decrease the need for duplication of expensive and little used materials if facsimile transmission and closed circuit television become economically as well as technologically feasible. The New York Public Library plans to open a student reference and circulation center which will have 500,000 volumes.¹⁵ Not to be overlooked are the possible relationships of libraries to the rapidly expanding library programs of the academic world, particularly the libraries of community colleges and universities. These libraries are growing both in number and quality. The strongest libraries of the future, if not already of the present, will be those of the public universities, and systems should consider them as part of the library network in filling the needs of their readers. Hopefully, the university libraries will accept this assignment, perhaps encouraged by state or federal aid.

It should be recognized that the big city libraries have need of financial assistance in the maintenance and expansion of their unique and regional research collections. While it is not likely that substantial aid will be forthcoming from the local unit, efforts to secure state and federal assistance should be supported heartily by libraries in the non-consolidated systems. With access to a strong central library, which in turn may call on additional resources within state, regional, or national levels, the several links in the chain of service will have been joined.

In examining the implications of the non-consolidated systems development, note that until recent years the library consolidation which

did occur involved small, usually rural libraries. There were relatively few instances of libraries in urban areas, that is, the medium-sized libraries, willingly joining a consolidated system. The literature on metropolitan government is voluminous but few students are expecting consolidation to be the method used to govern the metropolitan community. The big break-through came in New York State after 1958 where liberal financial and service rewards were provided to libraries joining a system. This trend toward affiliation with a non-consolidated system is a strong one and should grow if financial and service incentives continue. The increasing and expanding enticement of state and federal aid, possibly unobtainable except by libraries agreeing to join systems, will speed the trend to membership wherever offered. As has been noted earlier, the medium-sized library has discovered a comfortable place in the non-consolidated system which permits the retention of fundamental autonomy, is voluntary, and drains off no local funds. While the financial reward of membership was the dominant reason for initial membership, once within a cooperative system, acceptance and approval have been generally enthusiastic. Everyone believes library systems are here to stay.¹⁶ Once in the system, fears are allayed and withdrawals from such a cooperative are rare, if any; in New York State, in 1964 90 percent or 645 of 713 chartered public libraries were members of library systems and no record has been found of any withdrawals from a system.¹⁷

In California, where the county library has been predominant for many years, a county library cooperative system has been established which shows great promise as a device for joining county library systems into a non-consolidated system.¹⁸ Michigan, with its new state aid law, not yet fully implemented by appropriation, is establishing a pattern basically similar to the voluntary systems approach in New York State.

Looking to the future, the pattern of organization developed in the Wayne County (Michigan) Library holds possibilities for increasing the unification of the typical non-consolidated system without decreasing local autonomy. In the Wayne County System, with but few exceptions, the local library is administered by the County Library, including appointment of personnel. However, the local library board may select the community librarian within the rules of the civil service commission. All other appointments are made jointly by the local librarian and the central staff. Having jurisdiction over the employees of the system makes the organization more responsive to administra-

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tive control. The local board is responsible for the appropriation and control of funds, for the provision and maintenance of quarters, for representation of community library needs, and for review and evaluation of the service. In practice there has been no significant conflict between the local boards and the system's board. There have been no withdrawals from the system since its establishment in 1920. With the passage of time, such systems as that of Nassau County may be requested to assume the administration of an existing member library for such reasons as (1) local inability to recruit personnel, (2) dissatisfaction with the local library administration, or (3) the decision of the local library board that the system is better qualified to operate the library. Once the local authority recognizes that it still has all the vital controls over its library, it will be in a mood to relinquish many of its routine administrative headaches and gain still greater efficiency and improved service. For a board, it is not a long step from delegating administration to an individual (the community librarian) to delegating it to an organization—a system. Increasing state and federal aid throughout the various states will make possible another giant step in public library service. A non-consolidated system provides the structure by which the many excellent, independent libraries scattered throughout the country may do collectively, as members of a library service network, what each alone could not do.

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